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This document is for information.

This document sets out the UK higher education funding bodies' decisions on the broad framework for the assessment of impact in the Research Excellence Framework, and the weightings of the three elements: outputs, impact and environment.

Decisions on assessing research impact

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To

Heads of publicly funded higher education institutions in the UK

Organisations with an interest in commissioning or using academic research including businesses, public sector bodies, charities and other third-sector organisations

Of interest to those responsible for

Research

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Executive summary

Purpose

1. This document sets out the UK higher education funding bodies' decisions in relation to the following aspects of the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF):

- the broad framework for assessing the impact of research in the 2014 REF
- the weighting of the three elements in the assessment (outputs, impact and environment).

Key points

2. Following the conclusion of the impact pilot exercise, the four UK funding bodies have decided that:

- a. In the REF there will be an explicit element to assess the 'impact' arising from excellent research, alongside the 'outputs' and 'environment' elements.
- b. The assessment of impact will be based on expert review of case studies submitted by higher education institutions. Case studies may include any social, economic or cultural impact or benefit beyond academia that has taken place during the assessment period, and was underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitting institution within a given timeframe. Submissions will also include information about how the unit has supported and enabled impact during the assessment period.
- c. A weighting of 25 per cent for impact would give due recognition to the economic and social benefits of excellent research. However, given that the impact assessment in the 2014 REF will still be developmental, the weighting of impact in the first exercise will be reduced to 20 per cent, with the intention of increasing this in subsequent exercises.

- d. The assessment of research outputs will account for 65 per cent, and environment will account for 15 per cent, of the overall assessment outcomes in the 2014 REF. These weightings will apply to all units of assessment.

Action required

- 3. This document is for information. No action is required by higher education institutions. Further detailed guidance to institutions on preparing their submissions for the REF will be published in July 2011.

Introduction

Background

4. In November 2009 the four UK funding bodies published 'Research Excellence Framework: Second consultation on the assessment and funding of research' (HEFCE 2009/38). The consultation set out proposals for all key aspects of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment, including the introduction of an explicit element to assess the impact of research. This reflects policy aims across the four UK funding bodies to maintain and improve the achievements of the higher education sector, both in undertaking excellent research and in building on this research to achieve demonstrable benefits to the wider economy and society.

5. In terms of the impact element, HEFCE 2009/38 set out a number of principles and challenges in assessing research impact, proposed an approach to assessment based on case studies, and proposed that impact should carry a weighting of 25 per cent within the overall assessment. The funding bodies also stated their intention to run a pilot exercise to test and develop the case study approach, and invited volunteers to participate.

6. The responses to the consultation¹ indicated widespread support in principle for including an element for the explicit assessment of impact within the REF, from higher education institutions (HEIs), mission groups, the national academies, research user representatives and other funders of research, and from a clear majority of academic subject associations. Many qualified their support by emphasising the need to develop a robust method for assessing impact, and stressing the importance of the pilot exercise; they suggested the weighting for this element within the overall quality assessment should be lower than the proposed 25 per cent.

Impact pilot exercise

7. Following the consultation exercise, the UK funding bodies published 'Initial decisions on the Research Excellence Framework' (Annex A of 'Research Excellence Framework consultation outcomes', HEFCE Circular letter 04/2010). These decisions applied to all key aspects of the assessment

framework except for the assessment of impact and its weighting within the framework, pending the outcomes of the pilot exercise. The REF team then conducted a pilot exercise to test and develop the impact proposals with 29 HEIs making submissions to five pilot panels, in the following units of assessment (UOAs):

- Clinical Medicine
- Physics
- Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences
- Social Work and Social Policy
- English Language and Literature.

8. The impact pilot exercise concluded in mid-November 2010, with the publication of two key reports: 'Research Excellence Framework impact pilot exercise: Findings of the expert panels' and 'REF Research Impact Pilot Exercise Lessons-Learned Project: Feedback on Pilot Submissions' (by Technopolis). The reports, and further details about the conduct of the pilot exercise, are available at www.ref.ac.uk under Impact pilot exercise.

9. The pilot panels concluded that it is possible to assess the impact of research through an approach based on expert review of case studies. They also made a series of recommendations for refining and improving the process, for implementation in the full REF. Feedback from the pilot HEIs generally confirms these conclusions, and they were widely accepted through a series of events with the sector and other key stakeholders held during late 2010 to disseminate and discuss the pilot findings.

Decisions of the UK funding bodies

Key points

10. Following the conclusion of the impact pilot exercise and subsequent discussions about the findings, the four UK funding bodies have decided that:
 - a. In the REF there will be an explicit element to assess the 'impact' arising from excellent research, alongside the 'outputs' and 'environment' elements.

¹ A summary of responses is available at www.ref.ac.uk under Background/2009 consultation.

- b. The assessment of impact will be based on expert review of case studies submitted by higher education institutions. Case studies may include any social, economic or cultural impact or benefit beyond academia that has taken place during the assessment period, and was underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitting institution within a given timeframe. Submissions will also include information about how the unit has supported and enabled impact during the assessment period.
- c. A weighting of 25 per cent for impact would give due recognition to the economic and social benefits of excellent research. However, given that the impact assessment in the 2014 REF will still be developmental, the weighting of impact in the first exercise will be reduced to 20 per cent, with the intention of increasing this in subsequent exercises.
- d. The assessment of research outputs will account for 65 per cent, and environment will account for 15 per cent, of the overall assessment outcomes in the 2014 REF. These weightings will apply to all units of assessment.

Framework for assessing impact

11. The UK funding bodies have decided that the overall framework for assessing impact in the 2014 REF, that will apply across all UOAs, is as follows:

Scope of the impact assessment

- a. The impact element will include all kinds of social, economic and cultural benefits and impacts beyond academia, arising from excellent research, that have occurred during the period 1 January 2008 to 31 July 2013.
- b. Submitted impacts may be at any stage of development or maturity, so long as some change or benefit beyond academia has taken place during the assessment period. Submissions will be assessed in respect of impacts that have taken place during the assessment period, and not future or potential impacts.
- c. Impacts or benefits arising from engaging the public with the submitted unit's research will be included. Dissemination activity – without evidence of its benefits – will not be considered as impact.

Attribution and timeframe

- d. To be credited for an impact, the submitting unit must show that it undertook research that made a distinctive contribution to achieving the claimed impact or benefit, that meets standards of excellence that are competitive with international comparators. The submitting unit need not have undertaken all of the contributing research, or have been involved in exploiting the research.
- e. The timeframe for the underpinning research will be up to 15 years between the publication of at least some research output(s) that made a distinctive contribution to the impact, and the start of the assessment period (January 2008). This timeframe may be extended by a further five years for some UOAs, if the sub-panel makes an exceptional case for doing so.

Submissions

- f. Submissions will include a total of one case study, plus one further case study per up to 10 full-time equivalent staff returned to the REF. Submissions will therefore include a minimum of two case studies.
- g. Case studies will be submitted using a generic template with word limits. This will be designed to enable institutions to clearly explain and demonstrate the impacts through a narrative that includes indicators and evidence as appropriate to the case being made. The template will require information about:
 - the underpinning research and evidence of its quality
 - the way in which the submitting unit's research contributed to the impact or benefit
 - the nature and extent of the impact or benefit
 - references to independent sources that could be followed up (on a sample basis) to verify claims made.
- h. The onus will be on institutions to provide evidence within each case study to demonstrate the particular impact or benefit claimed; REF panels will develop guidance about the kinds of evidence and indicators they would consider appropriate but this guidance will not be exhaustive.

- i. The case studies are intended to show the strongest impacts achieved by the submitted unit's research. In addition to the case studies, submissions will include information about how, during the assessment period, the unit has supported and enabled the achievement of impact. Assessment of this information will make a significant contribution to the impact sub-profiles. The template for the 'impact statement' that was used in the pilot exercise will be re-designed for this purpose.

Assessment

- j. The outcomes of the impact assessment will be an 'impact sub-profile' for each submission, showing the proportion of the submission at each starred level (1* to 4* and 'Unclassified').
- k. Case studies will be assessed against the broad generic criteria of 'reach and significance' of the impact or benefit, and there will be broad generic definitions of the starred levels in the impact sub-profile that reflect differential levels of reach and significance.
- l. REF panels will be invited to explain in more detail how these criteria will be applied in ways that are appropriate to their disciplines.
- m. Given that the criteria will be applied in ways that are sensitive to disciplinary differences, the assessment of impact in the REF cannot be used to compare impacts submitted to different UOAs, or to provide a mechanism for comparing the relative impact of disciplines.
- n. The information about how the unit has supported and enabled impact will be assessed and contribute to the impact sub-profiles. Further guidance on the criteria for this will be developed in consultation with the REF panels.

Involvement of research users

- o. We intend that in all UOAs, expert 'users' of research from across the private, public and third sectors will be fully involved in developing the criteria for impact and in assessing the impact element of submissions, alongside academic panel members. Our approach to involving users is intended to ensure they make a strong input

into the impact element across all panels, while making effective use of their time:

- i. We have appointed research user members to all main panels and sub-panels. These members will be fully involved throughout the criteria setting and assessment phases.
- ii. During 2011 we will run a series of workshops for research users, to gain a wider range of user input into the criteria for assessing impact.
- iii. During the assessment phase, we will recruit a number of additional research users to be assessors on sub-panels, to be fully involved in assessing the impact element of submissions.

12. We are engaged in ongoing discussions with the Research Councils (through Research Councils UK) to ensure that the overall approach to recognising and encouraging impact is coherent across the dual support system. The above approach to incorporating impact within the REF complements that taken by the Research Councils; the REF will recognise and reward institutions for having achieved impact from their past research, while the Research Councils' 'Pathways to Impact' focus on exploring pathways to realising the impact of new research projects.

Weighting of outputs, impact and environment

13. The funding bodies are committed to attaching a significant weighting to impact, ensuring that it is taken seriously by all key stakeholders, and to make the benefits of research explicit and public. Nevertheless the impact assessment in the first REF is likely to be developmental, and the 2014 REF will be the first experience of assessing impact for those UOAs and HEIs that were not involved in the pilot exercise.

14. The UK funding bodies consider that the original proposals to weight impact at 25 per cent remain appropriate, giving due weight to the wider benefits of research within the overall assessment framework. However, given that the impact assessment in the first exercise will still be developmental, the weighting of impact in the 2014 REF will be reduced to 20 per cent, with the intention of increasing this in subsequent exercises.

15. The UK funding bodies have also decided that for the 2014 REF, outputs will be weighted at 65 per cent, recognising that this part of the assessment is well established, carries widespread confidence, and is at the heart of research excellence. Environment will be weighted at 15 per cent, giving due emphasis to this aspect of the assessment. These weightings will be the same in all UOAs.

16. Each element of the assessment (outputs, impact and environment) will result in a 'sub-profile', to be combined into an 'overall excellence profile' awarded to each submission, based on the above weightings. The 'overall excellence profile' will be the primary assessment outcome from the exercise, and we will also publish the sub-profiles. While the assessment outcomes will be produced in the same way for all submissions across the UK, each of the four UK funding bodies will in due course take its own decisions about using the assessment outcomes for funding purposes.

Further guidance

17. This document sets out the broad framework for assessing the impact of research, including generic criteria and standard weightings across all UOAs. Further guidance will be published, as follows:

- a. **July 2011:** We will publish guidance on submissions, setting out the information that will be required in HEIs' submissions, and the generic definitions and criteria that will apply. This will include guidance on the nature and format for the impact element of submissions, templates, more detailed explanation and definitions than appear in this 'decisions' document, as well as details of how the sub-profiles will be combined to form the overall assessment outcomes.
- b. **January 2012:** We will publish the panel criteria and working methods. These will set out how – within the overarching assessment framework – the REF panels will apply the assessment criteria and provide guidance on appropriate kinds of evidence and indicators of impact. The panel criteria will be developed by the four REF main panels with input from their sub-panels. We will publish draft criteria for consultation in July 2011.

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